

RADIOHEAD

PABLO HONEY SPECIAL COLLECTORS' EDITION/COLLECTORS' EDITION ★★★

THE BENDS SPECIAL COLLECTORS' EDITION/COLLECTORS' EDITION ★★★★★

OK COMPUTER SPECIAL COLLECTORS' EDITION/COLLECTORS' EDITION ★★★★★

EMI



Their first three albums, luxuriously repackaged and tracing their development from mannered youths to all-conquering masters of the universe.



If Radiohead needed any more grist to their anti-corporate mill, these reissues of their first three albums would provide it in abundance. In fact, their release could hardly be more at odds with the approach of

a band who caused a marketing stir in 2007 when they – nobly? Recklessly? – made *In Rainbows* a pay-what-you-will download.

Devoid of any previously unreleased material, these editions of Pablo Honey, *The Bends* and *OK Computer* arguably represent Radiohead's former label exercising their last pre-internet-era remnants of power over their precious back catalogue and, by extension, their fans. The format is undoubtedly expansive: each album comes as a Collectors' Edition – one CD featuring the original album, plus a disc of B-sides, rarities and sessions – and a Special Collectors' Edition, which throws in an impressive DVD of promo videos, live performances and television appearances. As a one-stop shop, it's efficiently comprehensive; as a concept, however, its artistic strip-mining is hardly in keeping with the band's constant evolutionary quest.

Yet these reissues only highlight the fact that Radiohead, a band who could fairly be called “rock royalty”, have been admirably reluctant to run trout farms, eat swans or buy yachts, their well-developed sense of outsider-dom protecting against rock bloat. It was with these three records that they laid down the blueprint for their own impressively ornery success – and the circumstances of their reissuing takes nothing away from that. Here is what happens when outsiders find themselves on the inside, a conflict with which they have struggled throughout their career and a tension that has significantly shaped them. Watch the excruciatingly stilted video for *Anyone Can Play Guitar* or their *Top Of The Pops* performance of *Creep* on 16 September 1993 (both from the Pablo Honey Special Collectors' Edition) and you're not obviously in the presence of genre-defining greatness: in much the same way as Thom Yorke's bottle-blond hair hangs on his head, they perch awkwardly on top of their new fame, still clinging to the mannered theatricality of old-time rock'n'roll.

The same could be said of 1993's Pablo Honey, a debut released when they hadn't travelled that far from a support slot with Irish indie-poppers *The Frank And Walters*. Even then, though, the quintet knew what they wanted, bringing in *Dinosaur Jr* and *Buffalo Tom* producers Paul Q Kolderie and Sean Slade in tribute to the American alt-rock they loved. It was a love that would see them cast as Britain's answer to Nirvana, but listening to the accomplished stadium intensity of *Anyone Can Play Guitar*, *Lurgee* or *Stop Whispering*, however, it's clear there's more going on here than a band hating themselves and wanting to die. This is a band who hate themselves but want to sell records. Attempts at commercial suicide would come later.

If it hadn't been for the lachrymose self-loathing of *Creep*,

though, it's hard to imagine where Radiohead might have ended up. That song's unit-shifting success gave them some momentum as Britpop surged and grunge fell from grace. By 1995's *The Bends* it was clear Radiohead were out of step with their contemporaries. They would have been unconvincing as either cheeky barrow boys or swaggering loudmouths – they were Abingdon public schoolboys, after all – and if their still-transparent US rock traits were slightly dishonest, they wouldn't be the first British band to look to America for career guidance. *The Bends* now seems to mark the one time in their career that they have ever sounded entirely comfortable, unabashed classic rock songwriting tempered by a strong art-school aesthetic. Capable of the delicacy of *Street Spirit* (*Fade Out*) and (*Nice Dream*) they also keep the guitar rock adrenaline flowing with *My Iron Lung* and *Planet Telex*, while *Fake Plastic Trees* and *The Bends* show them starting to meld the personal with the political. The second disc, despite offering few fan-startling treats, shows what a fertile period this was, particularly with the impressive punch of the *My Iron Lung* EP and *Maquiladora*, B-side of *High And Dry*/*Planet Telex*.

Tellingly, it was here that Michael Stipe started paying attention – a rite of passage for any band worth their *Fair Trade* coffee – and Radiohead started to become the new R.E.M. rather than the new Nirvana. It's often claimed that *Kid A* was the moment Radiohead attempted to shake off their new fans, the weight of expectation, the commercial pressures, but that process really started with *OK Computer*. That it should have been hailed as genius at a time when there were still a couple of lukewarm inches of Britpop lager left in the marketing glass still seems remarkable – after all, lead single *Paranoid Android* left people reaching for the words “prog” and “Pink Floyd”, still life-sentence fashion-crimes in the mid-'90s. It remains an astonishing record, however, blistering like a super-sensitive immune response to the pre-millennial tensions around them. Packed with cryptic fragments that lodge in your mental circuitry – the kryptonite glow of *Karma Police*, the spoken-word oddness of *Fitter Happier*, the post-apocalyptic raggle-taggle of *Electioneering*, the psychic mushroom cloud of *Lucky* – this is Radiohead reaching into the creative ether and, against the odds, managing to connect with their audience.

“Ambition makes you look pretty ugly,” sneered Thom Yorke from the dark heart of *Paranoid Android*. The opposite has been true of Radiohead. This is a band whose restless musical quest has sounded a grace note through modern music, whose refusal to settle into rock'n'roll's narrow confines has opened up a world of beautiful possibility. No matter how they're formatted, that much remains. ■ VICTORIA SEGAL

DOWNLOAD: *Lurgee* // *Anyone Can Play Guitar* // *The Bends* // *Planet Telex* // *Maquiladora* // *Paranoid Android* // *Pearly*

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POLYDOR 2009

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A chance to reappraise another landmark album, this time by the band that had a huge influence on the way Radiohead have run their career.



PORTISHEAD

DUMMY
UNIVERSAL/ISLAND
1994

★★★★★

Alienation, loss of self, technological chill: the Bristol band's debut probed some of Radiohead's key themes within a visionary electronic idiom.

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120 MAY 2009

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Radiohead, New
York, 1996: another
pound in the Smile
Box, Colin.